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AN EPISTLE TO
A CANARY

BY

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

New York

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

1914

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AN EPISTLE TO A CANARY

[The manuscript of the ensuing 'Epistle to a Canary' has not hitherto been printed, or even described. The verses, in the handwriting of the author, were preserved among the Browning MSS. until their dispersal after Robert Barrett Browning's death. The 'Epistle' bears no title, place, or date, but it is not difficult to reconstruct its history with some exactness. There can be no doubt that it was addressed to Mary Russell Mitford's pet canary, from 74 Gloucester Place, Portman Square, the Barretts' London house since 1835. The acquaintance of Miss Barrett with Miss Mitford began in May 1836. Formal at first, in a few months it ripened into a close and tender intimacy.

Late in January 1837, the country friend paid a visit, apparently her first, to 74 Gloucester Place, and saw the various pets, and the ways of the Barrett family, a knowledge of which seems presupposed in the 'Epistle.' It was about this time that Elizabeth wrote her poem, 'The Doves,' which was published in 'The Seraphim' of 1838, beginning

*My little doves have left a nest
Upon an Indian tree.*

It is one of this pair of doves who is supposed to indite the epistle to Miss Mitford's canary. Both ladies expatiated in their correspondence on the merits of their 'dear pets,' and letters exist in which they have sentimentally exchanged canary-feathers. Miss Mitford boasted herself a 'complete bird-fancier.' I think it possible that the present 'Epistle' may

be connected with that 'story of the Doves' which Mary Russell Mitford acknowledges in a letter of February 22, 1837. At all events the 'Epistle' must be earlier in date than August 16, 1837, when Elizabeth Barrett announced that 'a new little dove had appeared from a shell, over which nobody had prognosticated good.' It is incredible that, if so thrilling an occurrence had already taken place when the 'Epistle' was written, no mention should be made of it by the enthusiastic parent.

The poem is one of many loose and pleasant private missives in verse which Miss Barrett indulged in during those early years. It is valuable from the information it gives about the household at Gloucester Place, the birds, the dog Myrtle, William the butler, the shrouded and limited existence of the poet, with its win-

dows wide open to the horizons of the imagination. — EDMUND GOSSE.]

DEAR unknown friend, esteemed Canary!
I've read your letter sent by Mary.
I've read it with sufficient pleasure
To draw a joyous choral measure
From all the birds in Vallombrosa, —
A place you've heard of, I suppose, Sir.

My Spouse and I accept the honor
You put upon me and upon her,
And here with equal cordiality
Return our friendship's mutuality.
It is indeed a high communion,
When hearts of birds can meet in union,
And mine beneath my wing is beating,
Just like a lark's, the sunshine greeting,

To think that I, whose sun's a masked one,
Have still your friendship to be basked in;
That I and my companion, fated
To be for aye expatriated,
To sit at London windows, viewing
For fair green hills, the human ruin,
Hearing, for river-songs, wind-catches, —
'Old clothes, old clothes,' and 'Buy my
matches,' —
Should still have friendship's sweet assistance
From songful spirits at a distance.
For here is human friendship only,
And Mrs. Dove and I are lonely;
And tho', on seasons out of number,
We're kissed by human lips to slumber;
And tho' we feel caresses loving
Drawn round our eyelids, without moving —
And nestle upon hands, confiding,

As if in forest-shadows hiding ;
And even condescend to show us
Obedient when some tongues speak to us ;
Yet, after all, this human love,
Dear Sir, what is it to a Dove ?
It is not quite as cruel, truly,
As I did think, (I own, unduly,)
When first the dreadful reasoning creature
Surprised me in the hush of nature ;
But still 'tis poor and sad, half folly,
Half wildness, and whole melancholy ;
And if we were not near each other,
We should have only you, my brother,
To keep our spirits from dejection,
While darkened so with man's affection.

And now, dear brother-friend, Canary,
It seemeth to me necessary

To write a portrait of the being
You deign to value without seeing;
That, having read it, inartistic
As it may be, and egoistic,
You may attain a clearer notion
Of one who loves you to devotion.

My feathers, — do not think me proud, —
Are colored faintly as a cloud,
A fair brown cloud at dawn of day,
Which bears, within a golden ray,
A secret kept, which all the way
Shines out for joy. My feet are red,
Contrastingly, as used to tread
Bright sunset clouds, and thence retaining
The colour of their crimson staining;
My golden eyes may each have drawn
A spark of light from highest dawn,

Which glows and opens, as you view them,
Till sunset reds are likest to them;
Nor marvel that I so have won mine
Image out of clouds and sunshine,
When ancestors of mine, above them,
So often flew as Venus drove them,
And on my neck I still am wearing
The yoke-mark, which their part was,
 bearing
A fair light mark, my neck enringing,
A rainbow out of darkness springing;
I would not change it for your singing;
Tho' certainly Anacreon's story
Detracts a little from the glory,
Saying she sold him 'for a song' our
Grandsire, most insulting wronger;
But some, in dear esteem who hold us
Declare she never would have sold us, —

Not for an epic, whose aroma
Was all of amarynth and Homer.

Enough! No peacock's tail, a glowing
Upon earth's darkest dust bestowing,
Is swept by me (*my* tail partaketh
The universal shade she maketh!);
And yet with such a graceful motion
I rise and stoop like waves on ocean,
I hear applied what one expresses
About 'majestic lowlinesses.'

A sudden fear, reflection raises, —
'What will he think of these self-praises?'
But, dear kind friend, we birds inherit
No mounting and immortal spirit;
Our souls are our fair forms, and we do
More glory in them than men need do.
Yet beauty is not all, nor doubt me

(In naming other things about me),
I am too modest e'er to quarrel
With such as you for music's laurel, —
I mean for science! All my chanting
Was learnt from winds and waves descanting;
A solemn sweetness is its feature,
A sad slow monotone of nature, —
The fall of dew and leaf resembling
So much, it sets my bosom trembling
With a soft memory-passion, mourning
For things to which is no returning.
Alas! alas! what am I doing?
I break into a sudden cooing —
Forgive me! tho' myself affected,
I would not make my friend dejected.
And seriously considered, cages,
Tho' portions of the iron ages,
Are not, for all their wires, to shut us

From many true delights that suit us.
For all their iron wires, they loose us
To our 'adversity's sweet uses';
And I myself am quite aware of
A deepened inward sense, a care of
More intellectual things, than found me
With only woods and skies around me.
For instance, what imagination
Of bird, at large in the creation,
Tho' wont in flights sublime to risk it,
E'er reached a vision of white biscuit?

To balance this, I own at present
Some circumstances are unpleasant,
And the associates I am able
To mix with, are exceptionable;
There is a little dog whose name is
Myrtle! Oh, that aught so famous

To doves and Venus as that tree is
Should lend its name to such as he is !
But so it is, and, speaking justly,
This Myrtle's neither fierce nor crusty,
A poor dull worthy dog, reposing
All day beside the fire, with nose in
The rug, and eyes half shut, which show them
Properly meek, whene'er we do them
The honor of approaching to them.
Yet this same Myrtle (will you credit
The monstrous statement when you've read
it ?)

With insolent affrontery, hath in
The water placed for us to bathe in
Immersed his nose, and fall'n to drinking,
As if a common fountain-brink on ;
And this offence has been repeated
Twice, thrice or four times, and we meet it

With proper indignation, springing
Towards him with a martial singing
In our wings, and fiercely wave them
About his head, who dares not brave them,
But walks away, retiring slowly,
To show he is not servile wholly!
A worthy dog, in his totality, —
Tho' wanting tact and ideality.

Then there's a parrot with its staring
Black eyes, and insolence past bearing;
Our own compatriot, (Cain was Abel's,
As heard our grand-dame 'mong the cables
Of Noah's ark,) and green, most vernally
As if our tropic woods eternally
Had stained his wings, without bestowing
The calmness *their* deep heart is knowing
For *she* is full of stir and meanness

More anxious after *blue* than greenness ;
Her native screechings trans-atlantic,
Commingling with a slang pedantic
Of 'what's a clock ?' (Degenerate folly,
A bird take note of time !!) or 'Polly
Put on the kettle' or 'Water Cresses' !!
I name with horror these excesses,
And feel, from inward indignation,
I would not stoop t' articulation
Not even of Greek, — tho' tempted sorest, —
Not for a green nest in a forest !
This parrot habits, as is proper,
A lower room, and we, an upper,
And neither of us often views her
Except when people introduce her,
And then, dear friend, you'd really wonder
To see how she would keep us under, —
As if, besides her linguist powers, her

Tail was twice as long as ours are!
Devouring all our seed, or wasting —
Objecting even to our tasting.
Of course we would resist but (praise me!)
High-tree-born birds have delicacy —
And then — and then — if I must speak, Sir,
She has, besides her eyes, a beak, Sir!
My own compatriot, with such candour
Being portrayed, acquit of slander
My true opinion of another,
Whose honor 'twas, to call you brother;
Canary was he, even as you are,
Tho' his accomplishments were fewer.
A pretty, sprightly bird, that never
Reflected, hopping on for ever
With more of volatile giration
Than could deserve my admiration.
My spouse, myself, and Myrtle, eyeing

By turns, and sometimes even prying
 Into my nest, — which was most trying, —
Was! is not. He is gone! one morning,
 He flew whence there is no returning
 Beyond the opened panes, — to hie him
 Where human kind could not come nigh
 him.

Well! peace be his! may he have rested,
 Where every bird is music-breasted,
 Where shines the sun on Ax or Yarrow,
 United to some gentle sparrow.

And now, dear friend, I must pursue mine
 Account, by noticing the human.
 May you, the generous fates have brought,
 where
 Are none who don long coats and short hair,
 But if, of those dread beings, any

Are near you, near to me are many ;
And we may speak of griefs resembling,
In friendship's sympathetic trembling.
Alas ! dear friend ! what awful noises
They make with footsteps and with voices !
With what a clashing laugh they tease us !
How roughly by our tails they seize us !
And, in our sweetest chantings, cry out
(Have they *no* ear for music ?) 'Quiet !!'
There's one, — I think they call him Wil-
liam, —

A hawk's or vulture's soul must fill him !
For every day he's sternly able
To lay a red cloth on the table
And then a white one, like the lightening
Flashing wide ! It is *too* frightening !
Our very senses seem retreating,
And really, — we can't go on eating.

You'll wish that he would come this minute,
To end a scrawl with so much in it,
And so, farewell! You will not wonder
That metre-rules I've written under;
Creation's self's a poem, written
In lovelier rhymes than I have hit on;
And I was taught by winds pathetic,
Thro' shaken woods, to be poetic.
Besides I sit, — perhaps you know it? —
Close to a human feeble poet;
And tho' her verse is very wanting
In all that beautifies my chanting
Yet still she learns in nature's college,
And has a little sound dove-knowledge;
And I confess, — now don't discover
I condescend too much, — I love her!
At least you'll pardon me, Canary!
You love a human thing called Mary!

Farewell! we are not of one feather,
 Yet surely would agree together,
 And, tho' apart, believe the love
 You're held in by

your faithful

DOVE.

P.S.

I'm very glad you've heard of Bella.
 You'd hear but good, were *I* the teller!
 Had I an eagle's sky-dominion,
 I still would let her stroke my pinion.

ELIZABETH BARRETT BARRETT.

*[The Manuscript of 'An Epistle to a Canary'
 is now in the collection of Mr. Edmund Gosse.]*





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